

BOOK REVIEW

By JOHN K. HUTCHENS

STAT

TALE OF A WHISTLING SHRIMP. By Vladimir B. Grinioff. Dutton. 251 pages. \$3.50.

"WE WILL abandon communism when the shrimp learns to whistle," said Nikita S. Khrushchev, the old phrase-maker, in 1955. The words could scarcely have reached these shores before they were spotted by Vladimir B. Grinioff, a man who obviously reads the papers and knows a title when he sees one. Mr. Grinioff, like Mr. Khrushchev, has a Russian background, but he is not a Russian like Mr. Khrushchev — or like that other Vladimir, surname Dudintsev, whose "Not by Bread Alone" caused no small sensation when it actually reported from inside Russia that Heaven and the U. S. S. R. are not yet quite synonymous.



Vladimir B. Grinioff

Two, But Not of a Kind

This Vladimir, the author of "Tale of a Whistling Shrimp," left Russia as a child shortly before the October Revolution of 1917, was educated here, became a government economist, worked for the Voice of America, and is at present a consultant in Washington on Soviet affairs. If you have come across "Not by Bread Alone" in its recent American publication, and now if you turn to "Tale of a Whistling Shrimp," it can hardly escape your attention that the two Vladimirs are really saying approximately the same thing, in their quite different fashions and from their necessarily different points of view.

The burden of each book—a pretty heavy burden in the case of "Not by Bread Alone"—is that the U. S. S. R. contains a vast bureaucracy ridden with red tape and manned by frightened officials who chase a ruble with the felonious avidity of an old-time Tweed Ring capitalist in pursuit of a Gilded Age dollar. Since he is a dedicated Communist still within easy shooting distance of the secret

police, Mr. Dudintsev was obliged to indicate this somberly and with a certain circumspection (and to deny, in a preface to the American edition of his book, that this was his major purpose). The more fortunate Mr. Grinioff, free as air, and airy as you please in his approach, can call a spade a spade and whack his characters over the head with it whenever he feels inclined to. He does precisely this in "Tale of a Whistling Shrimp," presented as a satirical novel but in reality a slam-bang farce. As all classicists in the room will recognize, remembering their Molière, this does not for a moment mean that he hasn't a serious point to make.

At the center of the bludgeoning, the one most steadily beaten upon the pate is Taras Tarasovich Popugayev, in charge of extending credit for a bank in a city somewhere near Moscow. A genial crook with a penchant for accepting "gifts" from favor-seekers, he suddenly comes a cropper when it appears that his temperamental daughter has made subversive statements in the hearing of her schoolmates. Then the roof does indeed cave in on "TT" as his blackmailing chums, greedy pirates flying the hammer and sickle, make off with his horse, car, television set and household furniture, while they cynically challenge the old grafter to do something about it.

Vantage Point

All this takes place two years after the liquidation of Beria, but before the downgrading of Stalin, an uncertain political climate of which Mr. Grinioff makes good narrative use to bring his story to a raucous finish. But what may impress you most about "Tale of a Whistling Shrimp," more than its somewhat heavy-handed farcical hijinks, is the fact that a man in the free world writing about Russia can do so with more conviction than an apprehensive Russian on his home grounds.

Mr. Grinioff has a wonderful time, for instance, with curious quotations from Russian papers and official histories, introducing chapters with them and letting them make their own ironic point about the twisting party line. He also, it would seem, had a crystal ball hidden somewhere around the desk when he wrote this, since his story includes sundry incidents—even to the official fixing of a Soviet horse race—that have occurred since this work was finished. Or perhaps he simply knows his sometime country so well that he could imagine with assurance.